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Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) and its potential to contribute to the teaching and learning of academic writing.

**A paper presented by Trevor Day BSc MSc PGCE at the
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Key words: Academic writing, addressivity, behavioural modelling, learning, neuro-linguistic programming, teaching.

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) is a controversial communications discipline that emerged in the 1970s (Bandler and Grinder, 1975; Grinder and Bandler, 1976), drawing upon fields as diverse as cybernetics (Miller, et al., 1960) and transformational grammar (Chomsky, 1957; Grinder and Elgin, 1973). NLP has garnered little academic support until recently. Now there is growing recognition that NLP might have a role to play in teaching and learning in formal education (Craft, 2001; Ben-Avie et al., 2003; Tosey and Mathison, 2003a, 2003b; Day, 2005; Churches and Terry, 2007; Mahony, 2007). Recent discoveries in neuroscience offer support for a neurological basis for the NLP constructs of rapport, sensory acuity and behavioural modelling (Gallese et al., 2004; Iacoboni et al., 2005; Fogassi et al., 2005; Rizzolatti et al., 2006).

Drawing upon pedagogical practice, this paper considers three ways in which NLP might contribute to the teaching and learning of academic writing. The first is the use of perceptual positioning – metaphorically stepping into the shoes of others, including the reader of your writing (Hickman and Jacobson, 1997). The second is the crafting of language to encourage multi-modal representations in the reader's inner landscape. The third approach is the use of behavioural modelling (Dilts, 1998) to reveal key elements that contribute to the effective practice of writers, including their choice of how, where and when to write.

This paper is written from the perspective of a practising science writer with a background in teaching, training and coaching, who is also a university writing tutor with a remit to assist science and engineering students and staff. The paper seeks to begin a dialogue with researchers and practitioners to consider the contribution that NLP-based approaches might make to writing development in higher education.

This paper is not the place to explore the theoretical position of NLP. NLP has a recognisable and distinctive methodology. It has an emphasis on individual experience, it is concerned with the structure and representation of that person's experience (rather than interpretation of content), and its core methodology is behavioural modelling – seeking to distil and assimilate the 'difference that makes the difference' based on an individual's exceptional ability to perform a skill (Dilts, 1998; Dilts and DeLozier, 2000; Bostic St Clair and Grinder, 2001). It adopts a phenomenological approach insofar as words spoken are considered to reflect and reveal the structure and process of a person's 'inner world' (Mathison, 2006).

Perceptual positions

In NLP, the use of different perceptual positions involves 'stepping outside' one's own frame of reference to consider that of another person – real or imagined. Shifting this perspective enables the individual to gain a richer sense of relations between people, and gain understanding, in an intuitive and holistic manner, of more effective ways of facilitating communication between them (Hickman and Jacobson, 1997; Dilts and DeLozier, 2000).

On courses at the University of Bath, and elsewhere, the author sometimes encourages participants to inhabit different perceptual positions at key points in a writing course. One example is where shifting perspective is helpful in exploring one's own role or identity when engaged in a particular writing task, such as composing a scientific paper, dissertation or thesis. Students are asked questions such as: *In your own words, who are you when you are writing your thesis? Or put another way, what is your role?* Students consider this individually, and write their responses down, using their own naturally-emerging choice of nouns – 'guide', 'explorer', 'authority', 'enthusiast' and so on. They discuss their reactions to these choices with another student.

A pivotal next step involves encouraging the student to 'step outside' of themselves by physically shifting to another seat so that they are 'looking back at themselves' to where they had just been sitting. Guiding language is carefully crafted to support the impression that students are no longer themselves, but are someone else, looking back at themselves. They are prompted to answer the question *What would be the most useful qualities for the person (looking back at the themselves) to have in that role?* They respond to this individually, before being encouraged to 'step back' into themselves to consider *Which of these qualities do you think you already have? Which of these do you think you need to develop?*

Another opportunity for shifting perceptual position is when 'stepping into the shoes' of your reader. For example, one can consider at least four readers of a PhD thesis: supervisor(s), departmental reader/checker, internal examiner and external examiner. By using perceptual positions, the student can be encouraged to inhabit one or more of these roles. Doing so often makes them realize that they know little about that person, or how that individual might be reading the thesis, what they will be reporting on, and so on. More generally, of course, 'stepping into' being the reader – consciously or unconsciously – is often taken to be a key element in the craft of effective writing.

The power of using NLP's construct of perceptual positions, in the manner portrayed above, lies, in part, in physically shifting position, so that the person powerfully takes on the perspective of another. The described process adopts a technique called spatial anchoring, in which specific physical positions or locations become associated with particular states, roles or cognitive processes (Dilts and Delozier, 2000, pp1283-1284). Once practised, these initial reference experiences become 'internalized', so that the participant no longer has to go through the process of physically shifting position, to powerfully and cleanly move from one perceptual position to another, but can do so mentally.

The use of perceptual positions, used in a manner similar to that described above, is one of the best-received elements of the *Writing Your Thesis (Less Painfully)* half-day course for postgraduates at the University of Bath. In the *Empowerment for Writing: Writing for Empowerment* staff development project at the University of the West of England (2004-2006) – which the author co-facilitated – the powerful nature of shifting perceptual position was commented on specifically by three of the seven staff involved in the project (Fitzpatrick, 2006).

Sensory-specific predicates

In grammar, the noun 'predicate' refers to 'the part of a sentence which contains the verb and gives information about the subject' (Cambridge University Press, 2008) or 'a term designating a property or relation' (Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2008). In NLP,

predicates are regarded as 'process' words that refer to actions or qualities (commonly verbs, adverbs and adjectives). Sensory-specific predicates refer to specific sensory modalities: visual (sight), auditory (sound/hearing), kinaesthetic (touch/emotions/feeling), gustatory (taste) and olfactory (smell), (Dilts and DeLozier, 2000, pp994-995). According to NLP practice, the sensory-based predicates a person uses in a given instance are particularly revealing of the way that individual is representing to themselves the experience they are describing. This relationship between words spoken, and an individual's internal representation, underpins NLP's approach to communication. Sensory-based predicates are regarded as indicative of the structure of unconscious thought processes that gave rise to them. So, for example, someone revealing *What you're saying about that problem doesn't look right to me. It's not clear. It's all a bit of a haze*. In NLP terms, this is suggestive that the individual is visualising the problem.

Clearly, in many cases, such a simplistic connection between words expressed and the nature of a mental representation, may not apply. Testing the connection between the two can be explored by careful questioning using sensory-based predicates that are matched to the representational system the person might be using. But what has this to do with academic writing?

In enhancing writing skills among science and engineering students, this practitioner has found that raising the issue of sensory-based predicates is particularly helpful to those students who write about their work in rather abstract terms, and who do so using few sensory-based predicates (and those they use may be drawn largely or entirely from one sensory modality e.g. visual). Drawing their attention to such tendencies, and encouraging them to use sensory-based predicates in more than one modality, assists them to consider the response of the reader to their writing. It also encourages their use of analogies to communicate otherwise abstract concepts (involving algorithms, relationships between variables, and so on) in more concrete terms with which the reader can more readily relate. For example, a computer studies student, in seeking to describe the operation of a robotic vehicle, might be encouraged to do so by analogy with a person with restricted senses finding their way inside a building. By encouraging the student to use sensory-specific predicates for more than one modality, and getting them to describe qualities within each, they find that they can talk or write about the functioning of the robot in ways that are more likely to resonate with a wide range of listeners and readers.

Behavioural modelling

The use of perceptual positions and sensory-based predicates relate to addressivity and, in particular, the 'responsive understanding' of the reader (Bakhtin, 1986; Cheyne and Tarulli, 1999). The third approach considered here is concerned with seeking to reveal the constellation of practices that make a practitioner effective at a given task, such as completing a writing assignment.

In NLP, behavioural modelling is seen as a key generator of ideas, methodologies and applications (Dilts et al., 1980; Dilts, 1998; Dilts and DeLozier, 2000; Bostic St Clair and Grinder, 2001; Tosey and Mathison, 2003a). According to Claxton (2006), modelling is integral to enhancing students' capacity to learn. Lecturers, tutors and students can offer models of good learning practice in the classroom, lecture theatre or beyond, elements of which might be assimilated into students' own practice. Well-authenticated research on modelling in an educational context is sparse, including those based on an NLP approach (Day, 2005, 2008).

Behavioural modelling is a systematic approach to investigating how another person is able to perform a skill well. It involves *at least* the following steps (adapted from Dilts, 1998):

1. Find a person who has a particular ability that you wish to enhance in yourself and/or others
2. Through observation in as natural a context as possible, and through questioning, gather information, including sensory-based descriptions, about how the person carries out that ability
3. Doing so may involve seeking to inhabit that person's experience in first perceptual position (in their shoes), in second perceptual position (as a person interacting with them), and in third position (as a detached observer)
4. Distil the findings into cognitive, physiological and behavioural patterns
5. Organise the patterns into a logical, coherent structure, which can inform the practice for oneself and others

Tosey (2008) modelled the essay-writing practice of four successful essay-writers on the University of Surrey's MSc in Change Agent Skills and Strategies (CASS) course. He distilled seven steps from the findings of investigations into how these students completed their essay-style, 3500-word written assignments. These essays, written in an academic style, were 'conceptual, critical reflections' of a practical, developmental task the student had undertaken. Each student was interviewed for about 90 minutes, being encouraged to re-experience the process of carrying out an actual assignment as if it were happening in the here and now, rather than making a retrospective commentary about it.

Patterns revealed in the students' accounts were identified by Tosey (2008) through an iterative, analytical process, and then incorporated into a newly created model. The model was checked by exemplars as to whether it was representative of their practice. The model was set within the context of the essay being 'alive' – something that is conceived, grows, may at times become all-consuming, before it is 'let go'. The steps in the model were:

1. Setting a filter. This is a process – not necessarily fully conscious or deliberate – whereby connections are made between the essay title and experiences to which it might relate, and to relevant reading.
2. Gathering the 'pieces of the jigsaw'. Note-taking, from relevant literature and the recording of relevant experiences from practice, and organising these sources.
3. Mapping the whole. Creating a preliminary representation of the essay in a summary form, such as mind map or spider diagram.
4. Sitting 'at the edge of the unknown.' A transition phase between note-taking and planning, and writing flowing prose. All exemplars had tactics, plus self-questioning and indicators of progress, for encouraging movement through this phase. Their ability to manage this transition helped ensure that none of the exemplars had problems meeting their writing deadlines.
5. Writing (crafting). Common features include 'chunking' the writing process into a number of sessions, interweaving composing and reviewing, and the writing being a sustained effort over time, with immersion in the experience. There is a considerable amount of checking going on, against the essay title, the essay plan and assessment criteria, and with reference to notes and the literature previously read.
6. Refining: 'Written but still alive.' At this stage exemplars distance themselves slightly from their work, enabling them to polish and refine it, and in some

cases, better engage with the reader's perspective. They may also ask a friend or family member to read it.

7. Letting go. Each exemplar uses their own particular mix of indicators to establish that the time is right for finishing the essay. In some cases, this is because they felt they had done all they could in the time allocated.

Tosey (2008, p2) asserts, when the model has been shared with different cohorts on the Masters programme 'the students have commented that the model has been helpful both to sensitise them to the essay-writing process and to help them identify potential gaps or deficiencies in their own existing strategies.'

The current author modelled a modern historian and academic staff developer who is a prolific and successful writer. Findings were mapped against a conceptual framework commonly used in NLP (see Table 1).

Table 1 Neurological levels (levels of experience) adapted from Dilts (1998):

Level	Explanation
Transpersonal	Relating to a larger system of people
Identity	Who we are when we are engaged in the process
Values and beliefs	What matters to us (permission and motivation)
Capabilities	What we can do (organisation behind the action)
Behaviour	Specific actions that can be observed
Environment	Context and constraints

In this investigation, as in the previous one, the exemplar is encouraged to describe the process of writing 'as it happens in the moment' and the modeller's task is to check and recheck that the exemplar's description does accord with the exemplar's experience. It is common, as in Tosey's (2008) investigation, that the exemplar discovers many elements of their practice – including beliefs, mental representations and shifts in state – of which they were previously unaware. Short extracts taken from a modelling interview hint at the detail and complexity of the historian's practice:

Transpersonal My writing may well have a critical impact on the way that policy is formulated ... It may well effect a change ... It may well be able to give [policymakers] a better, well-informed platform to make decisions, it may well bring about ... even idealistically, the end of a dictatorship.

Identity There is a sort of strange part of me which is transmitted around, rather like a ... Doctor Who figure ... able to transcend space and time [taking the reader with me] ... there is a sort of Sherlock Holmes feel ... 'detecting', doing research ... having to articulate ... in a rather cerebral sort of way, with great attention to detail [detective and explainer]

Capabilities My notes have to be incredibly well organised. Referenced ... Because organisation of my material gives me the freedom to be creative. If my notes were disorganised, I would spend most of my time faffing around trying to find my material, and I'd lose the opportunity to do any writing at all.

Environment and behaviour Well there's a laptop sitting on the dining room table surrounded by piles of paper. There is one on my desk now that is about 8 or 9 inches deep. Some of which is flagged up. A lot of which probably isn't. All of the printouts are heavily annotated. And that's very characteristic of the way that I work. I

often have several mind maps, not very neatly completed, which give me my framework. And within that there are some codes that I use to refer me to the particular bits of work. The pieces of paper themselves are often very heavily annotated ... because I've written ideas as they come up. Marginal notes. Sometimes I use a colour scheme. So, anything ringed in green is an area worthy of quotation, and I make sure I have a reference for that. And that, again, will be reflected in my mind maps ... a green star.

The author's representation in mind of his book-in-progress *If you imagine the structure of the brain with a lot of neurones leading to little compartments of ideas ... and arguments and thoughts and reflections. And it would have a stem. A central, sort of, core or stem from which all the main ideas and central arguments come. Branching from that in three dimensions are all these different headings. At the end of that, the tips of that would be the miniaturised thoughts. Some of which are imperfectly formed, rather like a brain. They have not yet been developed. They're only there in imagination really. And other ones are, perhaps, much more clearly formed, because I've had a lot of experience of working on that area of writing before. I know what I'm doing. I've pretty much got those arguments set up. That's what it looks like. ... A piece of broccoli.*

Such accounts contextualise the dynamism, the ebb and flow, the chaos and order, of a creative writing process. For example, they reveal what nurtures 'flow' (a state of highly coordinated, absorbed and effective action, such as described in Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). They may disclose the internal and external factors that trigger the shifts between planning, composing, reflection, and refining: the movement between advance and retreat (Murray and Moore, 2006). The investigations explore affective (emotional), cognitive and metacognitive aspects of writing in the raw.

Conclusion

This paper has not sought to establish many and various links between NLP practice and the literary world of academic writing. Rather, it has sought to highlight just three practical approaches that might inform the teaching and learning of academic writing. Neuro-linguistic programming holds rich promise in 'exploring beneath the surface' at the way people carry out writing tasks. Its holistic approach, encompassing the way people think, the way they organise their actions and the way they communicate, has potentially much to offer.

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